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THE CASE FOR PRIORITISM: PART II

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Abstract

Debate is no stranger to evangelicalism. Rigorous dialogue among evangelicals ought to be welcomed as it clarifies issues, forms convictions, and sets agendas. The missiological disagreement between prioritists and holists is a case in point. Prioritists feel constrained to redress holistic reconfigurations of such fundamental concepts as gospel, kingdom, and mission. For the sake of the nations, this article seeks to compare and contrast prioritism with holism, trace the historical emergence of evangelical holism, offer reasons why prioritism more accurately represents a biblically informed approach to mission, and concludes with means by which readers can determine which viewpoint to affirm and promote.

WHY PRIORITISM?

Prioritists would do well to continue to listen to and learn from holists as all “see in a mirror dimly” and “know [only] in part” (1 Co 13:12). However, more persuasive arguments will need to be articulated by holists for prioritists to compromise any of the following convictions.¹

¹ In addition to what is presented here, other works promoting prioritism include David Hesselgrave, “Holes in ‘Holistic Mission,’” *Trinity World Forum* (Deerfield, IL: Trinity

Almost two millennia ago, Augustine of Hippo, while referencing the Great Commandment, shed light on the nature of mission by commenting, the “divine Master inculcates two precepts—the love of God and the love of our neighbor—and as in these precepts a man finds three things he has to love—God, himself, and his neighbor—and that he who loves God loves himself thereby, it follows that he must endeavour to get his neighbour to love God, since he is ordered to love his neighbour as himself.”²

Augustine says two things here which must not go unnoticed: 1) the way to loving oneself is to love God; and 2) the way to loving one’s neighbor is to encourage him to love God as well. Thus, although there are many ways to express the Great Commandment, its purest manifestation comes when God’s people persuade others to love God. This is the highest display of love a person can ever show, because, as Piper notes, “our greatest satisfaction” and “our greatest good, comes to us *in God*.”³ Therefore, when it comes to the lost, the best way to obey the Great Commandment is to implement the Great Commission.

Evangelical Divinity School, Spring 1990), “Holistic Christianity? Yes! Holistic Mission? No! . . . and Yes!” (cf. <http://www.dake.com/EMS/bulletins/hesselgrave.htm>), “Redefining Holism,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 35/3 (1999): 278–84, “Evangelical Mission in 2001 and Beyond—Who Will Set the Agenda?” *Trinity World Forum* (Deerfield, IL: Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Spring 2001), “Holism and Prioritism,” in *Paradigms in Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005), 117–39, “The Eclipse of the Eternal in Contemporary Missiology,” *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* 7 (2008): 53–66; Robertson McQuilkin, “An Evangelical Assessment of Mission Theology of the Kingdom of God,” in *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Third Millennium* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 172–78, “The Missionary Task,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 648–50, “Lost Missions: Whatever Happened to the Idea of Rescuing People from Hell?” *Christianity Today* 50/7 (2006): 40–42; Christopher R. Little, “What Makes Mission Christian?” and “My Response,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 25/2 (2008): 65–73, 87–90, “In Response to ‘The Future of Evangelicals in Mission,’” in *MissionShift* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2010), 203–22, “Breaking Bad Missiological Habits,” in *Discovering the Mission of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2012), 481–97, *Polemic Missiology for the 21st Century* (Amazon Kindle, 2013); Kurt Nelson, “The Universal Priority of Proclamation,” *Occasional Bulletin of the Evangelical Missiological Society*, Winter (2007): 3–6; Stan Guthrie, “A Hole in Our Holism,” *Christianity Today* 52/1 (2008): 56; “The Greatest Social Need,” *Christianity Today* 53/1 (2009): 18–19; Philippe Sterling, “Is There a Hole in Our Gospel?” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, Spring (2011): 83–97; William Larkin Jr., “The Contribution of Acts’ Understanding of Kingdom of God and Salvation to the Prioritism-Holism Debate” (unpublished paper read at the Evangelical Theological Society, November 2011).

² Saint Augustine, *The City of God* (New York, NY: Random House, 1950), 692.

³ John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), 130; A God-Entranced Vision of All Things (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 40.

This point leads to the next. In the face of horrendous injustices in the economic, social, political, and environmental spheres of present-day human existence, one injustice far surpasses them all. As Orthodox mission theologian Anastasios Yannoulatos rightly contends, the Christian

believes that for every human being there is no treasure more precious than the truth that was revealed by the word of God. Therefore, he feels that the people who suffer injustice most in our time are those who have been deprived of the Word, not because they themselves refuse to listen, but for the simple reason that those who have known it for centuries have not been interested in passing it on. He further feels that his “honour,” “justice,” “faith” and “love” cannot be genuine, if he does not try to do something practical—the best he can—in this direction. Like St. Paul, he feels that he is “under obligation . . . both to Greeks and to Barbarians . . .” (Rom. 1:14). He cannot look upon the Cross . . . and at the same time simply confine himself to praising the Crucified One . . . without sharing the universal purpose of this sacrifice.⁴

The most recent statistics indicate that those subjected to this predicament amount to over 2.1 billion unevangelized individuals.⁵ Surely this is the most currently pervasive and eternally consequential injustice confronting the mission of the church. This is not to excuse or minimize human suffering in any way since “Christians are rightly concerned about the grievous imbalances of wealth and food and freedom in the world.” Nevertheless, Christians must go beyond the horizontal dimension to the vertical one and press the question, “What about the most devastating imbalance of all: the unequal distribution of the light of the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ?”⁶ This is what the early church as well as the church during the modern missionary era focused on,⁷ and which the contemporary church must do again.⁸

In addition, Jesus and Paul on mission have much to interject into this discussion. Rather than painting a contrasting picture between these two, which prioritism has sometimes inadvertently done as a result of allowing

⁴ Anastasios Yannoulatos, *Mission in Christ's Way* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010), 59–60.

⁵ Todd Johnson, et. al., “Status of Global Christianity, 2015, in the Context of 1900–2050,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 39/1 (2015): 29.

⁶ Samuel Moffett, “Evangelism: The Leading Partner,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*. Fourth Edition (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 599–600.

⁷ Cf. footnote 41.

⁸ In this regard, James and Biedebach comment, “What has been the effect of [holism] in Africa? It’s an oversimplification, but the result is *the wrong missionaries doing the wrong things*. The African church needs help. Good at celebration and community, the

holism to define the terms,⁹ there is clear continuity between the Son of God and his apostle to the Gentiles regarding mission. Holists have described Luke 4:18–19 as the “mission statement” for Jesus’ life which combines “faith with action to overcome injustice and oppression.”¹⁰ A closer look at the passage, however, shows that

of the four infinitives from Isaiah that show the purpose of the Spirit’s anointing and sending of Jesus, three involve preaching. The poor are evangelized (*euangelizomai*); the prisoners have release and the blind have recovery of sight proclaimed (*kērussō*) to them; the year of the Lord’s favor, the Jubilee year, is proclaimed (*kērussō*). The other purpose is to send the oppressed away in freedom. Luke, then, regards the primary activity of Jesus’ ministry as preaching. Other tasks are present, such as Jesus’ healing and exorcism ministry or his sacrificial death and mighty resurrection, but these either validate or become the content of the gospel message.¹¹

African church (with a few notable exceptions) needs all the help it can get when it comes to church planting, spiritual depth, and theological training. However, the West is currently sending primarily two kinds of missionaries to Africa: first, missionaries who are *unprepared* to truly help the African church—wonderful, compassionate, college-age girls who have come to do orphan care; and second, missionaries who are *underprepared* to help the African church—enthusiastic men or couples who are eager to lead mercy projects, but whose lack of theological training and ministry experience means that they can offer little help of real significance to the African church. The work they do is emotionally rewarding for the missionaries and for the churches that send them. However, fewer and fewer of the kinds of missionaries who will make a long-term difference in Africa—Bible translators, church planters, and leadership trainers—are being sent. Pastors and church leaders in the West can do a lot to reverse the trend. First, missionaries on the field need to be encouraged to keep their eye on the ball: what a missionary *can* do and what a missionary *must* do are not always the same. Sending churches can encourage their current missionaries by regularly letting them know that the boring, humdrum, *strategic* proclamation work that they are doing is of the highest significance. Secondly, preachers who are committed to proclamation-focused missions need to speak out, offering the church something better than they’re getting from the social justice bloggers and the popular missional authors. It won’t be easy. Who wants to be (unfairly) branded as being against orphans or clean water? We don’t. But the price of silence is high: the church is poised to lose a generation of missionaries to secondary work such as building schools and digging wells. And if history has anything to say about the matter, we might lose the gospel too” (ibid., 49–50).

⁹ Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 144ff.

¹⁰ James Engel and William Dyrness, *Changing the Mind of Missions: Where Have We Gone Wrong?* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), 23.

¹¹ William Larkin, “Mission in Luke,” in *Mission in the New Testament: An Evangelical Approach* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 158.

Moreover, at the end of Luke 4, one encounters the statement, “I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose” (v. 43; cf. Mk 1:38). Hence, a careful reading of this chapter shows that the “mission statement” of the Messiah centers on proclamation (cf. Jn 18:37). In conformity to Jesus’ mission, Paul testifies, “for this purpose I [Jesus] have appeared to you, to appoint you . . . a witness . . . rescuing you from the *Jewish* people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me” (Ac 26:16–18). Elsewhere, Paul is even more specific, “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void” (1Co 1:17). Thus, if such an orientation marked out the two greatest missionary exemplars of the New Testament, one needs to come up with a legitimate reason why it does not hold true for those who desire to follow their example today.

The mission theology of Luke-Acts also contributes substantially to the debate. Graham Twelftree maintains, “In the light of the contemporary conviction that the mission of the Church comprises both evangelistic and social action—alleviating social ills—it is astonishing that Luke, the New Testament writer who has provided the most detailed theology and practice of mission, offers no support for such a view.” Evidently, “Luke sees Jesus as bringing eschatological salvation in the form of forgiveness, exorcisms and healing, not in any social action. . . . [He] sees salvation not in political or economic but in spiritual and personal terms,” and in Acts, the “mission of the Church in relation to those outside the community of believers is portrayed as continuing the preaching and healing ministry of Jesus. The care of the disadvantaged is directed solely to believers, ignoring the plight of a materially needy world.” In light of this, he concludes, “In the face of loud contemporary voices to the contrary, we probably have to conclude that . . . social justice or social action is not part of Luke’s theology and practice of mission. Rather, social action is directed to the Christian community [cf. 2:45; 4:32; 6:1–6; 11:27–30; 20:35]. It may not be inaccurate to say that, *whereas we preach the gospel to each other on Sundays and seek to bring social justice to the world, Luke maintained that the Church should preach the gospel to the world and apply social justice within the Church.*”¹²

Another vital subject that is rarely if ever considered in this discussion is the ministry of the Spirit of God in the church’s witness. According to Harry Boer, “there is a surprising and unanimous testimony in the New Testament to the relationship between the Spirit poured out at Pentecost and the witness of the Church.” The evidence he presents in support of this thesis is

¹² Graham Twelftree, *People of the Spirit: Exploring Luke’s View of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 196–97.

at least threefold: 1) several versions of the Great Commission show “the inescapable correlation” between the witness of the church and the work of the Spirit (cf. Mt 28:20; Mk 16:20; Lk 24:47–48; Ac 1:8), signifying that “the Spirit who indwells the Church and constitutes her life is a Spirit of witness”; 2) the terms associated with the activity of the promised Paraclete as described in John 14 to 16 include “*teach, remind, guide, show, convict, witness*” and thereby indicate that the Spirit is “Christ’s witness in and through men to the Church and to the world”; and 3) the apostles in general being “filled with the Holy Spirit and [speaking] with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance” (Ac 2:4) and Peter in particular proclaiming the truth about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (Ac 2:14ff), “establish that the central task of the Church is to witness to the great works of God in the power of the Spirit.” In light of this, Boer concludes, “If the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost is so centrally the origin and the undergirding, informing and empowering principle of the missionary witness of the Church, it would seem reasonable to expect that he should also have the greatest significance for the *concrete manner* in which the actual missionary work of the Church is performed.”¹³

Finally, the book of Revelation would seemingly be the last place to look in support of a prioritistic orientation for the church’s mission throughout the ages. However, Marshall concludes that it is appropriate to view the New Testament writings in their entirety as “documents of a mission” which in turn give birth to “missionary theology.” As such, he contends that the “primary function of the documents is . . . to testify to the gospel that is proclaimed by Jesus and his followers.”¹⁴ John’s Apocalypse clearly fulfills this agenda. “[M]ission is not just present but is a key theme in the book” and displayed on three levels: “1) God conducts his mission/witness via judgment . . . 2) The Lamb witnesses by giving himself up to be slaughtered so as to purchase/redeem people from sin to God . . . 3) The people of God witness by proclaiming these truths to the world and being willing to suffer for them.” In relation to this last level, most commentators agree that the “two witnesses” of 11:3 actually “symbolize the witnessing church.”¹⁵ The interpretive clue to identifying these witnesses as the church comes in 11:4 where they are referred to as the “two lampstands.” According to Schnabel, “As the seven golden lampstands that stand in God’s presence (1:12, 20; 2:1) represent ‘the church as the true temple and the totality of the people of God’ empowered primarily ‘to witness as a light uncompromisingly to the world,’ so ‘the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth’ in

¹³ Harry Boer, *Pentecost and Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1961), 101–12, 205.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 34–35.

¹⁵ Grant Osborne, “The Mission to the Nations in the Book of Revelation,” in *New Testament Theology in Light of the Church’s Mission* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 347, 363, 365.

11:4 represent the church in its role as witness. The number two . . . derives from the biblical law requiring at least two legal witnesses in a courtroom.”¹⁶ What this means is that “the church’s role in the final period of world history is portrayed primarily by means of the image of prophetic witness . . . following Jesus Christ the faithful witness [1:5; 3:14].”¹⁷ Richard Bauckham claims that the entire scene of 11:3–13 is actually

more like a parable, which dramatizes the nature and result of the church’s prophetic witness to the nations. Because it is a parable, it can be taken less as a straightforward prediction than as a call to the churches to play the role which God intends for them.

The story serves to show how it is that the prophetic witness of the church in the final period before the end can achieve a result which the prophecy of the past has not achieved: the conversion of the nations to the worship of the one true God.¹⁸

Furthermore, the “word ‘witness’ (*martyrs*) does not yet, in Revelation, carry the technical Christian meaning of ‘martyr’ (one who bears witness by dying for the faith). It does not refer to death itself as witness, but to verbal witness to the truth of God (cf. the association of witness with ‘the word of God’: 1:2, 9; 6:9; 20:4; cf. also 12:11) along with living obedience to the commands of God (cf. the association of witness with keeping the commandments: 12:17).”¹⁹ This witness of God’s people, along with miraculous displays of God’s power, contributes to the nations giving “glory to the God of heaven” (11:13), that is, to their conversion. It therefore becomes abundantly clear that the “reason why the church was drawn from all nations (5:9; 7:9) [is] so that it can bear witness to all nations.”²⁰ In other words, the “world is a kind of courtroom in which the issue of who is the true God is being decided. In this judicial context Jesus and the followers bear witness to the truth.”²¹ Accordingly, this “witness is the means by which God’s mission of bringing repentance to an evil world is taking place. The world turns against God’s people in hatred, rejection, and violence, but the saints turn to the world with gospel proclamation, bearing Christ’s weapon, the sword that comes out of his mouth proclaiming judgment and calling the nations to repentance.”²²

¹⁶ Eckhard Schnabel, “John and the Future of the Nations,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 12/2 (2002): 248.

¹⁷ Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy* (New York, NY: T & T Clark, 1993), 285.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 274.

¹⁹ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 72.

²⁰ Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 265.

²¹ Bauckham, *Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 73.

²² Osborne, “The Mission to the Nations,” 366.

Even though there is a difference of opinion on the extent to which the nations repent and convert,²³ what is not in dispute is the emphasis given to the witnessing role of the church in Revelation. As such, no matter which interpretive framework is adopted (i.e., preterist, historicist, futurist, or idealist), the final book in the Christian canon presents a consistent picture regarding the mission of the church in relation to the world—a focus on the verbal proclamation of the word of God on the part of a suffering church so that the “healing of the nations” (22:2) may at last come to pass.

WORD OVER DEED

If there is one remaining task for prioritism to clarify, it is this: in what sense can evangelism be considered the priority in relation to all other ancillary activities in the mission of the church?

There is first of all a *theological* priority. It is disappointing that in some of the major contemporary works on holistic/integral mission, the reality of hell is given either scant recognition or ignored altogether.²⁴ The explanation for this may be the need to address the physical aspects of humanity against the spiritual in an effort to rectify the supposed dualistic tendencies of prioritism in which the spirit takes precedence over the flesh.²⁵ What prioritism asserts, however, is not that the spirit is more important than the flesh, but that eternal realities always outweigh temporal ones. As Tim Chester explains,

to say that physical and spiritual belong together is very different from saying that the temporal is as important as the eternal. The Bible consistently says we should make the eternal future our priority. In Matthew 10:28 we read: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.” Is that dualism? Is this saying that the soul is more important than the body? If it is, then it is Jesus who says it. But in fact Jesus goes on: “Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28). The issue is not

²³ See the discussion by Osborne, 357–62.

²⁴ E.g., it is mentioned once in *The Mission of God* (306), *The Mission of God's People* (100), and in *The River of God* (195), but not at all in *The Micah Network Declaration on Integral Mission* (cf. http://www.micahnetwork.org/sites/default/files/doc/page/mn_integral_mission_declaration_en.pdf), the Lausanne Occasional Paper on “Holistic Mission” (cf. http://www.lausanne.org/docs/2004forum/LOP33_IG4.pdf), *Walking with the Poor*, and *Recovering the Full Mission of God*. For more on this subject, see Hesselgrave, “The Eclipse of the Eternal in Contemporary Missiology.”

²⁵ E.g., Bruce Bradshaw, *Bridging the Gap: Evangelism, Development, and Shalom* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1993), 27–28; “Holistic Gospel in a Developing Society: Biblical, Theological and Historical Backgrounds,” 202.

whether the soul is more important than the body. . . . The issue is that our eternal fate is more important than what happens to us in this life. . . . [T]he priority of the eternal future means that the greatest need for all of us is to be reconciled to God and so escape his wrath. . . . So the biggest problem we all face is God's judgment. . . . Time and again this has proved the greatest challenge facing Christian social involvement—to keep in view the greatest gift we have to offer a needy world: the words of eternal life.²⁶

Indeed, “Placing that which is temporal and unsatisfying alongside that which is eternal and teleologically final as special components of a life of service presents a mystifying incongruity. ‘Labor not for the bread that perishes but for that which endures to eternal life’ (Jn 6:27).”²⁷ One can only hope that those who affirm “*the nonultimacy of death*” will eventually come around to advocating the primacy of evangelism.²⁸

Second, there is an *abiding* priority. Stott believed that the distinction between evangelism and social action is often artificial. Although some individual Christians are called to specialist ministries (some as evangelists, others as social workers, and so forth), the Christian community as a whole should not have to choose, any more than Jesus did. In many missionary situations such a choice would be inconceivable. The evangelist could not with integrity proclaim the good news to the victims of flood or famine while ignoring their physical plight.²⁹

In sympathy to this view, Wright maintains, “The language of the ‘priority of evangelism’ implies that the only proper starting point must always be evangelistic proclamation. *Priority* means it is the most important, most urgent, thing to be done first, and everything else must take second, third or fourth place. But the difficulty with this is that (1) it is not always possible or desirable to the immediate situation, and (2) it does not even reflect the actual practice of Jesus.”³⁰

What is implied in these statements is that the existential context should be allowed to dictate the terms of mission. This same sentiment was expressed at the WCC's Uppsala assembly (1968) in the catchphrase “the world sets the agenda.”³¹ However, not the context, the world, or anything

²⁶ Tim Chester, *Good News to the Poor* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 58–60.

²⁷ Thomas Nettles, “A Response to Hesselgrave,” *Trinity World Forum* (Deerfield, IL: Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Spring 1990), 6.

²⁸ Chris Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 439.

²⁹ John Stott, “The Battle for World Evangelization,” 34.

³⁰ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 318.

³¹ Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 197.

else other than divine revelation can be allowed to establish the missionary impulse of the church. In reality, “if we wish to reflect on ‘biblical foundations for mission,’ our point of departure should not be the contemporary enterprise we seek to justify, but the biblical sense of what being sent into the world signifies.”³² The reason why this is critically important is because “If . . . social advance is put first in time . . . it is obvious that faith in Christ is not the foundation but the coping stone of social and moral progress [and consequently] we have, by deeds which speak louder than words, taught men to seek ‘all these things’ first [rather than] the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.”³³ Jesus and Paul, both of whom launched their ministries with proclamation (Mk 1:14–15; Ac 9:19–20), avoided this pitfall in mission in direct contradiction to the holistic mandate. In John 6, when the hungry multitudes sought the blessings of the kingdom apart from submission to the King, Jesus redirected their attention to this truth, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst” (Jn 6:35). Also, even though Paul’s church planting efforts negatively impacted the business ventures and livelihoods of people (Ac 16:16–21; 19:19, 23–27), he refused to shift his priorities. By implication, what this shows is that 1) there can be mission without social action, but the same cannot be said for proclamation; 2) the *missio Dei* determines the *missio hominum*, not vice versa—that is, God’s mission cannot be subjected to our mission, but rather our mission must be subjected to God’s; and 3) the personal aspirations of God’s servants are not what define the *missio ecclesiae*, but rather the divine obligations placed upon it with regard to the lost (cf. Lk 19:10; Jn 5:30; 1Co 9:19–22; 10:32–33). As such, those involved in social work must remember that while “evangelism and social action are partners in many situations, it is inadequate to think of them as corresponding activities of equal impact [because] the greatest need of the poor, as it is for all people, is to be reconciled with God.”³⁴ Thus, even while arranging a tourniquet for a lost person bleeding to death, the good news of how to avoid the wrath of God by believing in Jesus Christ must still be shared (cf. Jn 3:36; Eph 5:6).

Third, there is a *strategic* priority to word over deed. Lesslie Newbigin is well known for saying that “to set word and deed, preaching and action, against each other is absurd. . . . The words explain the deeds, and the deeds validate the words.”³⁵ Wright also labels the logic of those who believe that

³² David Bosch, “Reflections on Biblical Models of Mission,” in *Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 177.

³³ Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 83.

³⁴ Chester, *Good News to the Poor*, 73.

³⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 137.

prioritizing evangelism in mission will naturally result in societal transformation as “flawed.” The main reason for this accusation is that new Christians won by those who have emphasized gospel proclamation will imitate their example and not engage in social action themselves.³⁶ However, such viewpoints open themselves to sustained critique.

Besides the fact that non-Christians can replicate the philanthropic efforts of Christians, a rarely acknowledged truth on the part of holistic practitioners is that compassion ministries are “a bane as well as a blessing.”³⁷ This is true on at least two accounts: 1) they lead to “unethical conversions” as people convert “to Christianity in order to receive charity or material advancements,”³⁸ and 2) they produce “rice converts” as a result of the activities of “[r]ice missionaries.”³⁹ Hence, to assign the same intrinsic value to word and deed is both problematic and counterproductive.

It is also significant to note that since “our natural inclination [is] to avoid the stigma and rejection associated with Jesus,” it is easy “to find comfort in the notion that our deeds matter more than our words; indeed, that our deeds can *substitute* for our words. Not to worry, we seem to say, we’re preaching the gospel every day. We’re just doing it with our actions.” When this idea comes to fruition in mission we easily “gravitate toward those parts of our calling that receive cultural approval while shying away from the part that generates cultural censure.” Both Jesus and Paul were successful at overcoming this predicament: “Jesus neither spoke of nor carried out anything that could be called ‘social action’ in society at large” and Paul’s confidence was so strong “in the gospel’s inherent Spirit-infused power that he could rejoice even when it was being preached not merely in the absence of ‘embodied action,’ but out of overly sinful motives [cf. Php 1:12–18].”⁴⁰

In addition, it is unwarranted to underestimate the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit having a positive, beneficial impact on society through the transformed lives of believers (cf. Ro 12:1–2; Eph 4:26; 1Th 4:10–12; 2Th 2:7; 1Pe 2:12; 3:16–17). On the subject of slavery in the early Christian period, for instance, Kenneth Scott Latourette comments,

Christian teaching ameliorated the lot of slaves. While Paul commanded slaves to obey their masters as slaves of Christ, doing their work as unto him and not unto men, he also exhorted masters to

³⁶ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 320.

³⁷ David Hesselgrave, “Redefining Holism,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 35/3 (1999): 281.

³⁸ G. P. V. Somaratna, “Buddhist Perceptions of the Christian Use of Funds in Sri Lanka” in *Complexities of Money and Missions in Asia* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2012), 15.

³⁹ Jonathan Bonk, *Missions and Money*. Revised and Expanded (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 77.

⁴⁰ Vinay Samuel, Chris Sugden, and Harold Lindsell, *In Word Versus Deed: Evangelism and Social Responsibility* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 21, 49, 52, 92.

forbear “threatening” their slaves, remembering that there is no “respect of persons” with Him who is in heaven, the Master of both earthly masters and slaves. In a very touching letter Paul returned a fugitive slave to his master, pleading with the latter to receive the runaway as a brother in the Lord. Paul also declared that in the Christian fellowship there is neither bond nor free, but that “all are one in Christ Jesus.”

Christianity undercut slavery by giving dignity to work, no matter how seemingly menial that might be. Traditionally, labour which might be performed by slaves was despised as degrading to the freeman. Christian teachers said that all should work and that labour should be done as to Christ as master and as to God and in the sight of God. Work became a Christian duty.

Before the end of the fifth century slavery was declining. This was not due entirely . . . to the influence of Christianity, but the latter contributed to it.⁴¹

Hence, the supposed fallacy of “infinite regress” which assumes that emphasizing evangelism in mission will not positively affect society is a denial of history.⁴² Indeed, a Wilberforce is predicated upon a Wesley.

Furthermore, promoters of holistic mission must be careful of burdening the church in mission with expectations that surpass biblical ones. As Duane Litfin observes, the “Roman Empire of the New Testament era was the epitome of an unjust society, but nowhere do Jesus or his apostles argue . . . that challenging these structures is the task of the church.”⁴³ Yet the high aspirations of holism make “the church *alone* responsible for the disintegration of society [and thereby links] the church with a cause that cannot succeed in the present age.”⁴⁴ In reality, the church “never can *promise* the solution of economic, social and political problems . . . for the simple reason that the Church cannot pretend to govern the economic and political factors that determine the outward course of the world at large.”⁴⁵

Even if holists disregard such criticisms, one is still left wondering how they would respond to those who say, “I do not want your help . . . despite all the nobility and charitableness of spirit in which you offer that help, for I have my own spiritual resources to draw upon and want to become saved according to my own fashion?” In truth, “There is, from the standpoint of secondary motives and purpose that have been falsely converted into pri-

⁴¹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Volume I: to A.D. 1500* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1975), 245–46.

⁴² Wright, *The Mission of God*, 320.

⁴³ Samuel, Sugden, and Lindsell, *Word Versus Deed*, 164.

⁴⁴ Hesselgrave, “Holes in ‘Holistic Mission,’” 4.

⁴⁵ Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1963), 430.

mary ones, no valid answer to this argument.”⁴⁶ To avoid this situation, it is imperative to acknowledge that “the gospel has been spread abroad without [holistic ministries], and we need to be reminded that they are not indispensable. If we forget it we make social progress our gospel and become more concerned about social progress than spiritual regeneration.”⁴⁷

Fourth, there is a *geographic* priority. An important discussion that is noticeably absent in the materials promoting holistic mission is the measures by which to determine when its goals have actually been achieved. Within the last few decades, the global community has witnessed a hurricane in New Orleans, floods in China, tsunamis in Banda Aceh and Japan, a typhoon in the Philippines, and earthquakes in Haiti and Nepal. If history is any indicator, more natural catastrophes are unfortunately just around the corner. Each time they occur, calls go out for resources to be deployed in meeting the physical needs of those affected. Nevertheless, few ever stop to think, let alone voice, whether or not this is the best use of the church’s resources, given that one-third of the world’s population remains in dire need of the gospel. This leads to the next point.

Last, there is a *financial* priority. The historical record shows that efforts to improve the socio-economic conditions of people have taken away from evangelistic ministries both in time and treasure.⁴⁸ This situation persists into the present. For example, Frew Tamrat, principal of the Evangelical Theological College in Ethiopia, reports that

those ministers who have a clear calling to be evangelists prefer to involve in social work than preaching the gospel to the lost. If you are a social worker involved in development work, you will be paid more than the evangelist who labors in taking the gospel to unreached people groups. As a result, this has created among believers in Africa and especially in Ethiopia the idea that the work of preaching the gospel is the lowest job of the church. Even though the churches involvement in humanitarian work has brought significant improvements among several communities, its over emphasis has deprived the church from making the preaching of the gospel its priority. In fact, in some places, development works that are run by churches have been causes for church splits and division. In some extreme cases, because of conflicts among church development/social workers, the church has been dragged to court and this has resulted in the church losing her witness for the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid., 293.

⁴⁷ Roland Allen, *The Ministry of the Spirit* (London: World Dominion Press, 1960), 99.

⁴⁸ Donald McGavran, *How Churches Grow* (London: World Dominion Press, 1959), 12.

⁴⁹ Email to the author, July 27, 2014.

One church in the same country was even shocked “by the fact that there were more [foreign] financial resources [made] available for relief and development work than for evangelism.”⁵⁰ Such incidents are lamentable in and of themselves, but as Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert note, they fall short on another level altogether: “You can make a good case that the church has a responsibility to see that everyone in their local church community is cared for, but you cannot make a very good case that the church must be the social custodian for everyone in their society.”⁵¹ In fact, the “New Testament . . . never commands the church’s diaconal work to assist people outside the church. What the New Testament authorizes . . . is that the church’s diaconal ministry should be directed toward needy Christians.”⁵² Therefore, in light of its limited funds, the “church should tend toward doing those activities and spending its resources on those projects that *more directly*, rather than *less directly*, further its central mission. . . . [T]hat doesn’t mean that the church will only ever do activities that are a *direct* fulfillment of its mission. . . . [T]he point is simply that there is in fact a mission given to the church by its Lord that is narrower than ‘everything we could do.’”⁵³

CONCLUSION

After contrasting prioritism and holism, recounting the road to evangelical holism, describing some of the weaknesses of holism and strengths of prioritism, and delineating the reasons why word takes precedence over deed

⁵⁰ Mark Thomsen, *Mission at the Dawn of the 21st Century: A Vision for the Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Kirk House Publishers, 1999), 261.

⁵¹ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2011), 176.

⁵² David VanDrunen, *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 158. However, N. T. Wright counters that the reason why one does not witness the New Testament church performing anything approximating social action today is because of its miniscule size (*Paul and the Faithfulness of God* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013], 449). In response, if the Antiochene church could organize famine relief for the church in Jerusalem (Ac 11:27–30), if Paul could coordinate the Gentile collection project for the same church (Ro 15:25–27; 1Co 16:1–4; 2Co 8–9), and if the church in Ephesus could create “no small disturbance concerning the Way” among devotees of Artemis (Ac 19:23ff), then why couldn’t it have also implemented programs to counter all manner of socio-economic, political injustices throughout the Roman empire? It surely could have, and thus, the reason why it didn’t can only be that it felt called to fulfill other agendas in relation to society. As Scot McKnight surmises, “*kingdom mission admits the primacy of evangelism but sees the locus of the social dimension to be first and foremost in the church as a witness to the world*” (*Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church* [Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2014], 152).

⁵³ DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?* 235.

in mission, the two perspectives are thrown into stark relief. Nevertheless, it is entirely possible after all that has been said that some may still find it difficult to decide which view to affirm. The following questions are meant to be of assistance in this regard:

1. Are the eternal needs of human beings more important than temporal ones?
2. Is what Jesus did for humanity on the cross infinitely more significant than anything the church can do for others?
3. Does the gospel involve what Jesus has done for others, not what the church can do for them?
4. Is the greatest injustice in the world today not social, economic, political, or environmental in nature but the unequal distribution of the word of God whereby the lost may be reconciled with their Creator?
5. Is it acceptable to move on to unevangelized areas to introduce the gospel rather than remain behind to address the perennial humanitarian problems Christians face?
6. Is it appropriate to spend the majority of the church's resources in mission on evangelistic rather than social ministries?

If a person is able to answer most of these questions in the affirmative, then that person leans toward prioritism. Such a person will unapologetically defend and act upon the view that although the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ may not be the only blessing the church in mission has to offer the world, it is beyond measure the greatest blessing it has to offer.

About the Author

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